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AUTHOR Vogt, W. Paul; McKenna, Brian J.
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ABSTRACT

Teachers' tolerance and their attitudes toward diversity were studied through a survey of 521 graduate and undergraduate students. The majority of the graduate students were teachers pursuing master's degrees, and most of the undergraduates were in preservice teacher education courses. The surveys were related to political, social, and moral diversity. In addition to the survey responses, information on teacher attitudes was drawn from 8 focus group interviews with 77 inservice teachers, 18 whole class discussions, and 22 open-ended questionnaire completed by students. Most of the attitudes held by these educators were well-formed and not susceptible to change by comparatively fleeting influences, such as a discussion of issues. Intolerant beliefs and attitudes were held more strongly (as is the case with the general public) than tolerant beliefs or practices. Teachers and future teachers differed widely in their level of tolerance for diversity, and their responses were distributed almost as widely as those of the general public. Few extreme conservatives or extreme liberals were found. (SLD)

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TEACHERS' TOLERANCE: THEIR ATTITUDES TOWARD POLITICAL, SOCIAL, AND MORAL DIVERSITY

Paper read at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Diego, April, 1998.

By W. Paul Vogt and
Brian J. McKenna

Direct Correspondence to:
W. Paul Vogt
Dean's Office, College of Education, 5300
Illinois State University
Normal, IL 61790
Phone: 309-438-8575
Fax: 309-438-3813
e-mail: wpvogt@ilstu.edu

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OBJECTIVES AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Preparing schools to deal constructively with social diversity clearly requires the active participation of teachers. The level and quality of that participation is likely to be influenced by teachers' attitudes toward diversity. While we know quite a lot about the general public's attitudes toward diversity in society and in schools (gleaned from such sources as the General Social Survey or the Phi Delta Kappan annual polls), we know much less about teachers' attitudes on these issues. More profoundly, the origins of those attitudes -- including the reasons for them that teachers would offer if asked -- remain largely unstudied.

Among the questions examined in this study are:

1. How do teachers' attitudes on issues of tolerance and diversity compare to those of the general public?
2. What is the "dimensionality" of their attitudes, that is, do teachers' tolerance and attitudes toward diversity tend to be of a piece or do they vary by type of diversity (do questions on diversity form one or more than one factor)?
3. What are the correlates of educators' attitudes? Previous research has suggested that, among members of the general public age and education, for example, were important predictors of tolerance. Is this true for teachers as well?
4. Can respondents reflecting on their attitudes in focused group interviews provide insight into these questions?
5. Would discussion, during which teachers had time to reflect on their answers to the survey questions, influence the way teachers would answer them?
6. Would the answers to questions about teachers' attitudes vary by the methods used to investigate them? Of particular interest here is any difference between studying attitudes using focus groups as compared to attitudes expressed on surveys.

SUBJECTS AND METHODS

We visited 18 different classes at 4 different colleges and universities in New York State. Nine of these classes (245 students) were graduate-level education classes in which a substantial proportion of the students were teachers pursuing master's degrees (permanent certification requires a master's degree in New York State). Other students in these classes were seeking degrees in educational administration, school psychology, and special education, among other fields. The other nine classes (276 students) were undergraduate courses typically taken by students in preservice teacher education programs. All students ($N = 521$) were surveyed. The curriculum in each class was related, in one way or another, to the subject matter of the survey. For example, we surveyed students in classes in the sociology of education, adolescent psychology, educational psychology, and social foundations of education.

The surveys contained about¹ 40 items on political and social attitudes, most with direct or indirect reference to education and schooling. Some of the items were written for this study by the authors. Other items (14 to 17 depending upon the version of the survey) were drawn from or closely based upon the annual General Social Survey (GSS) or the annual Phi Delta Kappan (PDK) survey of probability samples of the adult population. This allowed us to compare our respondents to the general population and to use the large literature on responses to these surveys (especially to the GSS) to interpret our findings.

The surveys contained 4 parts:

1. Subjects responded to questions drawn from national surveys of the general public dealing with attitudes toward political, social, and moral diversity in society as a whole and more specifically in schools, e.g.: attitudes toward school integration, free speech, interracial marriage, consensual homosexual relations among adults. (26 to 29 Questions)
2. Respondents were asked to read four one-paragraph accounts of hypothetical controversies in public high schools and to answer questions about them. Each account was loosely based upon actual controversies reported in the media. The four paragraphs described issues of student dress codes, interracial dating, student free press, and a controversial speech in a series of Diversity Day assemblies by a member of the Gay Alliance. (11 to 13 Questions)
3. The second set of questions was repeated after focus-group or whole-class discussion. Only in-service teachers participated in the focus groups and only graduate students were resurveyed. (11 Questions).
4. Finally, background/demographic data were gathered, including: age, gender, ethnicity/race, undergraduate major, extent of graduate education, years of teaching experience, subjects/grades taught. (10 Questions).
5. In some of the classes we visited, a few students had already completed the survey in another class. In such cases we asked the students to answer several open-ended questions about the survey—its validity and its relevance. (22 evaluation sheets)

In sum, we have 5 sources of data:

1. 521 survey questionnaires
2. 8 focused group interviews with in-service teachers ($N = 77$)
3. 18 whole-class discussions
4. 22 open-ended questionnaires
5. spontaneous comments written on the surveys, usually by students eager to explain why they answered the questions as they did.

LIMITATIONS

Despite the richness of these data, several cautions are in order. Our sample was not a "convenience sample" in that it was quite inconvenient to collect data from a large and diverse group of students attending four quite different institutions of higher education. But there is no sense in which the 521 students we interviewed can be thought of as "representative" of any population. As this study is exploratory and primarily examines the relations among attitudes and the explanations subjects give for holding them, a sample of the kind we have used is appropriate, if not ideal. Further data are being gathered from two more universities (one public, one private) in state in a different region of the country, but even were we to increase greatly the number of participating institutions, the same caveats about the generalizability of our findings would apply.

RESULTS

In this paper we will discuss only some of the results of our on-going research. Those results fall into four general categories:

1. Attitude change as a result of participating in a class discussion or in a focused group interview.
2. The patterns or structures of attitudes and what those patterns tell us about relationships among attitudes.
3. Differences in educators' attitudes depending on whether they were investigated with focus groups or using surveys.
4. How educators explained their attitudes and the patterns among them.

1. Attitude change as a result of participating in a class discussion or in a focused group interview.

After the initial survey of our 245 graduate students we spent roughly an hour discussing the surveys and the issues they raised. The discussions were conducted either in a pull-out focus group of 8 to 10 experienced teachers or in a whole-class discussion with those not participating in the focus groups. These discussions centered mainly on the survey's last 11 questions. Those questions asked subjects to respond to 4 stories or vignettes concerning issues that arose in high schools and that raised questions of students' rights. All four stories were based more-or-less closely on actual events that had been reported in the news media. (Interestingly, we found that most of the students, whom we informally polled in the discussions, had not heard of the news events, even though one of the events was working its way through New York State's appellate court system and the other took place in a high school in the region where the students were surveyed.)

The four paragraph-long stories were about:

- (a) a gay speaker at a high school assembly;
- (b) interracial dating at a high school prom;
- (c) a student dress code incident; and
- (d) high school students' rights to a free press.

After a discussion of the four issues, students were resurveyed to gauge the extent to which the discussions influenced their attitudes. Scores on the pretest and posttest ranged from -11 (the most conservative score) through 0 to +11 (the most liberal or tolerant score). We computed difference scores between the pre and post tests and found, in brief, not much difference. The modal difference score was zero and 78% of those surveyed changed 2 or fewer points on a 23-point scale. The only strong change in the answers to the 11 questions was that the percentage responding "don't know" declined by about one-quarter on 9 of the 11

items (from 12% to 9%). The distribution of change scores was bell-shaped but too leptokurtic to be normal. While a few people changed quite a lot (as much as 7 or 8 points), no clear pattern of change was discernable. People were as likely to change in one direction (conservative or liberal) as the other. On average, respondents moved in a more liberal direction on 6 of the 11 items and in a more conservative direction on the other 5. Finally, the change as a result of participating in a focus-group discussion was no greater (or smaller) than the change as a result of participating in a whole-class discussion.

Our reading of the research literature on responses to attitude surveys had led us to expect fairly substantial change. Relatively small differences in question wording or question order or the context in which questions are asked has been shown in many studies to result (sometimes) in substantial changes in how questions are answered (See Schuman and Presser, 1981; Schuman et al., 1997). Giving people more time than is typical to think about their answers has also been shown to influence how people respond (Vogt, 1997, pp. 46-58, for a review). We were particularly interested for pedagogical reasons in whether a non-directive but serious discussion would influence attitudes. There is some literature to suggest that mere discussion of an issue will do much to influence how people think about it. If that were so, perhaps one could use discussion techniques to foster tolerance or combat prejudice. But our hopes in this regard were disappointed. (Incidentally, the fact that we were surprised by several of our findings raises some doubt about the extent of the much discussed power of researchers' expectations to influence results.)

Our explanation for this lack of change is basically that our respondents were highly educated (graduate students). As educators and future educators, many and perhaps most of them had already given considerable thought to the kinds of issues we were raising in our vignettes. Hence their attitudes were already well-formed and not as susceptible to change as they might have been with different groups of subjects, whose attitudes might have been more likely to qualify as what is sometimes referred to as "non-attitudes" (Smith 1984). Further research along these lines could perhaps benefit from studying first- and second-year college students or adults not particularly concerned about educational issues. If our explanation for the lack of change in this study is correct, we would predict more change among younger and less informed respondents.

2. Patterns or structures of attitudes and what they tell us about how attitudes are related.

The students we surveyed tended to be considerably more tolerant or liberal than the general public. This conforms to results of many other surveys which indicate that university students in particular and more highly educated respondents in general tend to be more liberal or tolerant on political and social issues (but not on economic issues [see Vogt 1997]). However, our educators were not more tolerant than members of the general public with similar levels of education.

Demographic variables tended to be of very modest importance in our sample. On most issues there were no major differences among our students' attitudes based on age, gender, status (graduate or undergraduate) or type of institution of higher education attended.² Our preliminary review indicates some differences in attitudes by major field of study, but we have not finished our analysis of these data as yet. The only other striking finding was a fortunate by-product of how we asked one of our demographic questions. We asked students "What is your race/ethnicity?" and then provided a blank space for them to write in their answers. While we have not yet completed our tabulations, we have already found that the number of labels students applied to themselves to be very large. We would not have identified this variety of self-concepts, or at least self-labels, had we followed the typical

practice of using a forced-choice format for our race/ethnicity question. We would suggest that other researchers might find the open-ended question productive in studies of respondents' self-identifications.

To begin to categorize attitudes we constructed 4 "scales." These were clusters of 6 to 11 questions on similar topics that we had written or borrowed for our survey. They concerned four topics: (1) student dress codes and uniforms; (2) freedom of the press, especially for student publications; (3) race relations in schools and in society more generally; (4) attitudes toward homosexuality in schools and in society. Each of these "scales" had satisfactory alphas (ranging from .7 to .8).

But when we factor analyzed our "scales," we found that only one of them formed a true one-factor scale. That was the cluster of 6 questions pertaining to freedom of the press and censorship of written material ($\alpha = .76$). This does not mean, of course, that most respondents were strong supporters of freedom of the press. Quite the contrary. Of our 4 clusters of related questions, college and university students gave the least tolerant, least libertarian responses to questions about student freedom of written expression. Most respondents, graduate and undergraduate, did not object to punishing students who had independently published a one-page flier that criticized the principal and most did not oppose prior censorship by the principal of independent student publications.

Questions about appropriate dress for high school students (7 questions; $\alpha = .73$) actually formed two quite distinct factors: one pertaining to uniforms and another related to strict dress codes. Basically, people who want strict dress codes do not necessarily favor uniforms for school students, and vice versa. We had thought that educators' attitudes would be more of a piece on matters of dress.

The extensive variety we found in teachers' and future teachers' attitudes is not too surprising in retrospect, and we will comment more fully upon it below. Here it is worth while pointing out that the variety was greater than captured by our tabulations of survey answers. We found that people who took our survey were eager to explain their answers, to say that their views were not all of a piece, to say "it depends." Respondents were especially eager to explain their answers when they were illiberal or intolerant. That was true in the whole-class discussions, in the focus groups, and in the remarks respondents made in the margins of the surveys.

Our analysis thus far has mostly applied to the surveys and discussions in the graduate classes. We will report here on one distinct analysis conducted on the responses of the 276 undergraduates we surveyed. We constructed a 10-item tolerance scale drawn mainly from the General Social Survey (GSS). Ever since the 1950s the general public in national surveys has been asked a series of questions about communists, atheists, socialists, militarists, homosexuals, and racists. The questions all take the same form: Would you oppose an admitted _____ if he wanted to give a speech in your community, teach in a college, have a book in the public library, teach in a high school (we added this one to the GSS questions), or have a book in the high school library? We asked questions from this general tolerance scale about two individuals: "an admitted homosexual" and a "person who believes that Blacks are genetically inferior."

Given what we had learned about the diversity of attitudes on the graduate surveys, we did not know exactly what to expect, but we no longer expected these 10 questions to form one scale. One possibility, supported by some research literature, was that people would make a distinction on the basis of "target group" (homosexual or racist). Another was that they would

think of public speaking as different either from books in libraries or from teaching. We also expected a distinction between high school and college teaching (which is why we added the high school question to the GSS's list). We thought that respondents might see a difference between what is tolerable for the compulsory education of minors versus the voluntary education of legal adults. We were wrong, at least partly, again.

Upon analysis, we found that the 10 questions formed 3 factors.³ The first had to do with target group. Respondents answered the questions about the homosexual in pretty much the same way, and that way was very strongly tolerant. The second factor had to do with the racist's teaching, both in high school and in college. And here the answers were very largely *intolerant*. They were similarly intolerant for the other racist activities—having a book in the public or high school library or giving a public speech. These ten questions were important for several reasons. They show how nuanced attitudes can be and that tolerance tends to be quite situational. They also provided our only glimpse of "political correctness" among our teachers and future teachers. Most, though not all by any means, were very tolerant of gays, but they were quite intolerant of people with racist beliefs and seemed quite willing to argue for repressing their civil liberties. We can get a better sense of some of the reasoning behind such responses by combining our survey answers with an analysis of what was said in the discussions we conducted about the issues raised in the surveys (see point number 4, below). But first, let's take a methodological detour comparing the results of surveys and focus groups.

3. Differences in educators' attitudes when studied in focus groups or in surveys.

We were surprised by some of our survey results. We had listened to students discussing the issues before we had an opportunity to tabulate their survey responses. While the tone of the discussions and the emphasis in the surveys was often similar, sometimes it was not. Particularly noteworthy was the tendency for conservatives to be more outspoken and to be more passionate in their responses. They put their views more forcefully and tended to dominate the discussions. For example, we thought that we would find, after we tabulated the results, that the majority of our respondents would oppose a speaker from the Gay Alliance talking at Diversity Day in a high school assembly. But that was not the case. Only 18% thought that this was an inappropriate topic for an assembly and only 12% thought that the school board should ban such speakers in the future. On the other hand, a large majority (72%) thought that parents ought to have prior notification and rights of prior censorship of what their children would see or hear when something controversial was proposed at the high school. This latter finding, about parent notification, matched the results we obtained from our analyses of the focus-group transcripts.

The fact that conservatives tend to hold their beliefs more strongly is well known in the political science literature (Marcus et al., 1995). We saw it again in a series of questions about a valedictorian who showed up to give his speech at the honors banquet dressed in "grunge" style. Our impressions from the discussions were that most respondents would have stopped him from speaking, but in fact only 21% responding to the surveys said they would do so.

This raises an interesting methodological question about the interpretation of results from different forms of research. When we get "conservative" results from our qualitative research and "liberal" results from our quantitative, which do we believe? Which are more accurate? When we have asked this question of friends and colleagues, the most commonly suggested answer is that the focus-group results were more accurate. Their reasoning, which seems peculiar to us, usually takes the following form. People lie situationally. When they say one thing on a survey and another in a public discussion, the survey responses are more

doubtful. Many of our colleagues are predisposed to doubt opinions and beliefs when they are expressed in surveys.

The assumption that the focus groups are more accurate strikes us as misplaced for several reasons. Our findings are drawn from three sets of answers. People indicated one thing on a survey. Minutes later, they suggested something else in a discussion, and again, after a discussion, they returned to their original views when resurveyed an hour later. Rather than say that one set of results or the other is merely artifactual, we are more persuaded that *both* are "true," both reveal something about attitudes in context. Probably the survey is the more accurate way to measure the *presence* of beliefs, but the discussion or focused group interview is a better way to measure the *strength* of beliefs. When we think about prediction rather than explanation, we get a similar "division of labor" between the two methods. If we wanted to predict how communities might decide about certain issues, the qualitative data, though misleading in some respects, would probably be very helpful in others, and likewise with the quantitative results. For example, if we wanted to guess how a public school board meeting or a PTA meeting was likely to turn out, our qualitative (discussion) results might well be the better predictor. But if we wanted to predict the results of a formal vote, the quantitative (survey) research would probably be more accurate. The two different methods mirror the two different social contexts (public discussion and private voting). Neither is right or wrong; each reveals an aspect of social reality.

4. How educators explained their attitudes and the patterns among them.

When we considered the focus-group results pertaining to the "inappropriately" dressed valedictorian, we found 2 main themes in the discussions. The first was that the main function of schooling was to prepare students for the "real world," in which conformity in matters of dress is very important. As one respondent put it: *in the real world we go by looks, by image*. For educators with this view of things, reality is image. Oddly, the real world is "imaginary," as it were. We are reminded of something "Dogbert" said in a recent comic strip: I've come to realize that what's inside a person doesn't count — because no one can see it.

The opposing view, that the grungy valedictorian should be allowed to speak, was mostly justified by appeals to his having earned the distinction: *Obviously he's worked very hard and he's very smart. Who cares what he wears?* This division—between "who cares" what he wears and "we go by image" in the real world — basically boils down to a value division between the importance of the curriculum and the importance of the so-called "hidden curriculum." I say, so-called, because it is not hidden. Conservatives have often argued, openly and publicly, that the main function of schools is to promote conventional values and that the formal curriculum, by comparison, could be quite secondary.

The survey contained a vignette and survey questions about interracial dating at the senior prom. The vignette was based on events in a high school in the Old South widely reported in the media. This vignette engendered very little discussion either in the focus groups or in the whole-class discussions. When we counted the survey responses, we found very little disagreement among our 521 respondents. Less than 5% thought that, even in the face of community pressure, the interracial dating should be prohibited, as the actual principal in the Old South high school on which our vignette was based had done some two years earlier.

A final pair of themes was evident in the discussion of the vignette having to do with censorship of a student newspaper and punishment of students who had independently printed a flier and distributed it on school grounds. These survey questions divided people more than any other set; and there was a comparatively high percentage (around 17%) of undecided

responses to the survey questions. Two themes emerged in the focus-group discussions that shed some light on the divisions and uncertainties. The first was fear of losing control. School administrators and teachers have a right and a duty to maintain control, even at the cost of what some respondents thought were students' constitutional freedoms. A second theme in the discussions was the importance of not being offensive. As one teacher put it: *sure they have a right, but not if it infringes on other people's rights by being offensive*. There is a new interpretation of the constitution abroad in the land. We found many teachers and future teachers talking of the right not to be offended as though this were a constitutional guarantee, and as though it were a constitutional protection more important than freedom of speech. Some educators appeared quite willing to ban from the high school almost *anything* that anyone might possibly find offensive.

Both of these themes—maintaining control and banning offensiveness—also come up in the other discussions. They were fairly important in the discussion of dress codes (the case of the grungy valedictorian). They were also mentioned in, though they did not dominate, in the discussions of the gay assembly speaker. And they were the only reasons offered by the few people who hesitantly suggested that the interracial couple should not be allowed at the prom.

Among the main justifications teachers in the focus-group discussions gave for non-tolerant responses to the questions was *parents' rights*. If we think of a hierarchy of rights, it often took the following form among our respondents: Parents rights "trumped" both students' rights and educators' expertise in the thinking of most educators who argued against tolerance of particular types of diversity. And the school's rights to maintain order and ban offensive words also trumped the civil liberties of students. Hardly any educators we surveyed and questioned in discussions said that student rights were unimportant. But many respondents thought that they were less important than the school's rights to educate and socialize students in an orderly and inoffensive manner. And these school rights, in turn, were usually held to be subordinate to parents' rights over their children even in the face of a different interpretation by professional educators about what is valuable in the curriculum and the extra-curriculum.

CONCLUSIONS

What shall we conclude about these groups of responses to questions about tolerance and students' rights? How can we characterize the pattern of results? A few things stand out.

First, most educators' attitudes were well-formed and not susceptible to change by comparatively fleeting influences, such as a discussion of issues.

Second, intolerant beliefs and attitudes seem to be held more strongly by educators (as they are by the general public) than tolerant beliefs and attitudes. This means, for example, those who opposed multicultural education that included sexual orientation would be more likely to be outspoken and have their opinions heard than those who favored including issues of sexual orientation in multicultural education.

Third, like respondents to the General Social Survey, teachers and future teachers differed widely in their level of tolerance for diversity; their responses were distributed almost as widely as those of the general public. We found few extreme conservatives or extreme libertarians. Individuals tended to have views that were hard to predict using such labels as liberal or conservative, tolerant or intolerant. This finding contradicts one of the better known conclusions in the "literature." As Gilbert & Sullivan (1899) put it:

I often think it's comical
How Nature always does contrive
That every boy and every gal
That's born into the world alive
Is either a little Liberal
Or else a little Conservative.

Clearly, we need a more complex theory to describe and explain the attitudes and beliefs of educators than a world neatly divided into Conservatives and Liberals.

NOTES

1. The exact number of questions differed between the earlier graduate and the later undergraduate versions of the survey.
2. There were some differences, particularly between undergraduate and graduate students, with undergraduates being somewhat more liberal/tolerant on many, but not all issues. Several of these differences were statistically significant. However, since neither the graduate nor the undergraduate samples were representative of the larger population of graduates or undergraduates, it would be unwise to draw conclusions based on such differences.
3. Various methods of rotation produced only minor differences of emphasis in the factor structure of the answers.

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